

Town Manager Fiscal Year 2002

The annual “awakening” of Amherst, after a quiet summer, occurred in 2001 with a vengeance. A commemorative display of 29 American flags, which was recommended in the budget and approved with little discussion, was installed on downtown light poles in mid-August, as a “trial run.” Compliments for the display flowed into the Veterans Services office; concerns about the display were communicated to the Select Board/Town Manager’s office. The flags were removed after Labor Day, as had been recommended by the Veterans Agent, but the removal was considered by some to be capitulation to vocal opponents of the display. A permanent flag was added to Town Hall, which brought to four (including the Common, the Police Department and the Fire Department) the number of permanent Town Government displays of the flag downtown.

The Select Board had never established a policy for the duration of the display, but it did so following an emotional public meeting on September 10. The decision was to display the flags for six holidays, concluding that a longer display would actually detract from the impact of the display on those holidays. The events of September 11, 2001 began to unfold less than 12 hours later, and in the patriotic fervor that followed, Amherst’s flag policy was misrepresented in the national media as a limitation on citizens’ and businesses’ right to fly the flag except on six holidays. Countless hours were consumed in an effort, only somewhat successful, to respond to the resulting outrage and to correct the record.

The previous local furor, involving the proposed parking garage, virtually evaporated while the garage was constructed throughout the year under the watchful eye of Clerk of the Works Ned Markert. Parking was, of course, tighter than ever, with adverse consequences for some downtown businesses (others seemed to manage perfectly well). Compliments began to come in as the garage neared completion in June.

The Amherst sanitary landfill, on the other hand, neared the end of its life. The ZBA denied the Town’s application to increase the height of the finished landfill for the purpose of extending its life and delay an adverse financial impact on both citizens and the General Fund. As a result, landfill hours were limited, and the final grade of the landfill was revised (but at the same height) in order to extend its life somewhat.

The financial impact of the landfill closing was of particular concern because the state was experiencing a precipitous decline in state revenues as a result of the impact of previously enacted tax cuts and a slowing economy, the latter partly the result of the events of September 11. It was inevitable that local aid would not increase as it had in the past and might even decrease. And, as in the past, it was clear that the level of local aid would not be determined until well after Town Meeting would adopt a budget; so Town officials struggled to balance revenue assumptions with their impacts on budgets and services. The result, thanks to a high level of collaboration among those officials and to the use of \$1.2 million of Free Cash, was a budget without program expansion but also without terribly significant service reductions. There was widespread consensus that the

following fiscal year would be worse (and would unfold in the context of a ballot question on the proposed Charter). The Town's citizens were affected as the University was hit hard by budget cuts and subsequent reorganization, layoffs and early retirements at virtually every level on campus.

Bill Start retired as Building Commissioner after 30 years with the Town. Bonnie Weeks was appointed Interim Building Commissioner, and a search for his replacement was scheduled for the following summer. Noel Ryan retired as Superintendent of Public Works after 12 years with the Town and was replaced by Guilford Mooring, who had been the assistant superintendent in Northampton. Sonia Aldrich was appointed Town Accountant as that position was re-established. Kris Pacunas replaced Maria Toyofuku as Information Systems Director after her resignation. All three new appointees quickly won praise for their performance.

Shenandoah Titus resigned after five years as Human Rights Director to take a similar position in Somerville. Eunice Torres was appointed to assist the Human Rights Commission and to serve as Interim Human Rights Director. The former Human Rights Director and the Town Manager were among several Town staff members who assisted the Disabilities Access Advisory Committee in its monthly meetings to review access issues for various Town and private projects. Maura Plante was appointed to assist the D.A.A.C. with these reviews in the absence of a permanent Human Rights Director. The Director position was scheduled to be reevaluated by the Human Rights Commission and Select Board before it would be filled.

In the last month of the year, the Town suffered the loss of Bill Kosloski, a 34-year Public Works employee and a resident of Amherst, in a tragic automobile accident. Director of Administration and Finance Nancy Maglione ended the year as Acting Town Manager while the Town Manager was on medical leave.

FY 02 was a difficult year, but difficulties were overcome.

Barry Del Castilho
Town Manager